Confronting Homelessness: Poverty, Politics, and the Failure of Social Policy

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LYNNE RIENNER PUBLISHERS

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Homelessness: From Crisis to Routine

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, many residents of the major urban areas of the United States found themselves suddenly awakening to the fact that people were living out of cardboard boxes, sleeping over heating grates, or living in their vehicles. For the first time since the Great Depression, homelessness reemerged in the United States as a social problem. Despite broad disagreement about the "deservedness" of such people and what caused them to become homeless, there was little question that something apparently new and stunning was happening. Seeing sleeping and prostrate people in bus and train stations was shocking, and being asked for change by groups of people who looked like beggars and vagabonds from a Charles Dickens novel aroused people: some to anger, some to shock, some to anxiety, some to concern. Advocates testified that there were millions of such people and that their presence signaled an "impending catastrophe" (Montgomery, 1981). In September 1980, the Community for Creative Non-Violence (CCNV), an activist group, testified before Congress:

> Envision, if you will, an infinitely long line of people, stretching—five, ten, twenty abreast—as far as the eye can see. There are literally millions of them—men, women, and children. Slowly, painfully, some walking, others shuffling, limping, crawling, they pass before you. These are the nation's untouchables. America's pariah: invisible, disposable, surplus. They are the destitute homeless. . . . This, the vast army of America's homeless: the progeny of our ignorance, our indif-

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> ference, our insulation, and our pathological demand for conformity and productivity. They are a reflection of our unwillingness to confront difficult problems. (Hombs and Snyder, 1983, p. 129)

While some observers urged compassion, assistance, and even radical change, others assigned blame, declaring personal problems and dysfunctions as causes of homelessness. Regardless, the reality of this apparently new and challenging situation was clear:

> They can be seen any night now, sleeping on the floor of North Station—or any of scores of other sites around Boston—sitting unsteadily on benches or in doorways, mumbling nonsense. Some are alcoholics. Some are deinstitutionalized mental patients. As winter closes in, they are all even more homeless. The shelters for alcoholics are filled. The mental hospitals can't take patients in unless they are considered dangerous. (Dietz, 1980c, p. 1)

Homelessness would become a major social issue in the United States by the 1980s, a newly emerged social problem, seemingly forgotten since the Great Depression. Nearly every city (and some towns and counties) organized homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and food or clothes pantries. Volunteer efforts took hold, including those that would become famous: "Second Harvest," which collected food thrown out by restaurants and others for presumed use among the poor; "Hands Across America," which challenged people to respond to homelessness with goodwill; and "Comic Relief," a comedy-led marathon organized by Billy Crystal, Whoopi Goldberg, and Robin Williams, which raised funds for the homeless. New classes on homelessness were established at universities, new departments devoted to homelessness and housing were created in some cities, and new movements of the very poor emerged. But there was opposition to the homeless as well, with some citizen groups opposing shelters and other "handouts," and "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) movements flourished. Some young people would harass or even physically attack homeless people. Conservative commentators countered liberal and radical advocates by minimizing homelessness and blaming the homeless themselves for their own problems (see, for example, Awalt, 1991; Limbaugh, 1991).

What is of interest here is how time-limited the new social problem of the homeless was. The term "homelessness" was not used by the major media outlets (the *New York Times* was still using the term "vagrant") in the early 1980s. The *New York Times* published only 12 stories citing

"homelessness" in 1981, compared to 352 stories in 1990. But by 1995 the number had halved, to 156 citations, and by 2005 only 92 references were found. On the opposite coast, in the *Los Angeles Times,* the number of references to "homelessness" soared from 5 in 1981 to 444 in 1990, but then dropped to 234 in 1995 and to only 97 in 2005.[1] In the 1980s, political figures spoke of homelessness as an emergency or, like President Ronald Reagan, dismissed it as exaggerated, but by the 1990s and 2000s, political candidates of both major parties would hardly utter a word about homelessness. The 1988 election was the last time that "homelessness" or "extreme poverty" was even mentioned in a presidential campaign. It was not an issue in the two Bill Clinton elections in the 1990s, the George W. Bush elections of 2000 and 2004, or the Barack Obama election of 2008. The Vanderbilt Television News Archive, which archives the broadcasts of the major media networks, confirms this pattern. A tiny number of stories on the homeless typified the early 1980s, but by 1986 (the year of "Hands Across America") the number of stories grew to forty-six, and reached an all-time high of fifty-three stories in 1990. By the early 1990s there were about thirty-five stories a year on average, but this number trailed off to eighteen stories a year by the late 1990s and early 2000s (see Figures 1.1–1.3).[2] These figures may exaggerate the issue, as it is not al-

Figure 1.1 Articles on Homelessness in
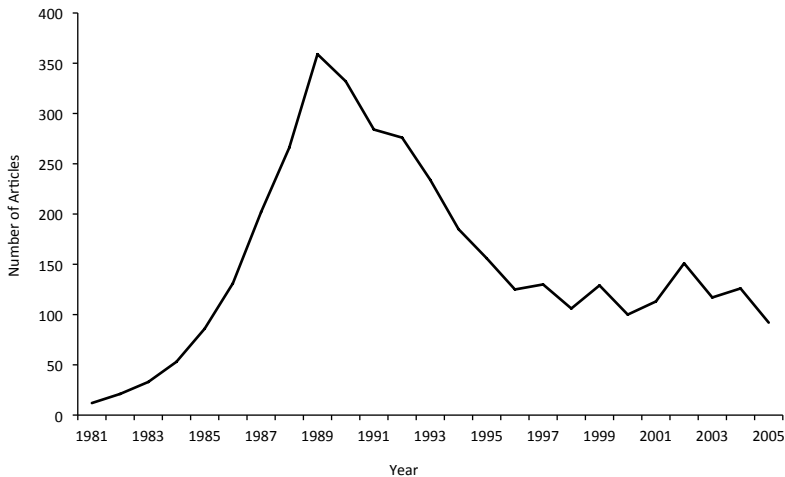the *New York Times*, 1981–2005

Figure 1.2 Articles on Homelessness in
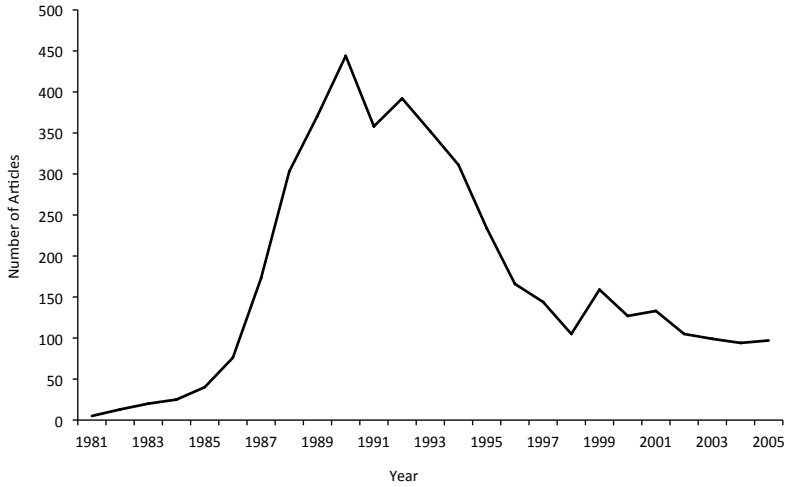the *Los Angeles Times*, 1981–2005

Figure 1.3 Network News Pieces on the Homeless, 1980–2007
(coverage from ABC, CBS, CNBC, CNN, FOX, and NBC)

ways possible to separate out stories about people who become homeless due to fires and tsunamis in other nations from stories about the homeless in the United States.

Of course, no one would be sorry if this decline in mass media coverage and political attention had happened because the problem of homelessness has been solved. But no one, from either left or right, from government or advocacy groups, or from any major media outlet, has argued this; the current debate is only about how many hundreds of thousands of citizens are homeless each night, and how many millions are homeless each year. Two advocates put this dilemma of the issue of "falling from the scene" into perspective:

> Something remarkable has happened to the spectacle of the street-dwelling poor in the two decades since it reappeared on the public stage: Homelessness became domesticated routine; an all-but-expected feature of the urban landscape. No longer cause for vocal concern, let alone outrage, it has been integrated into that cheerless diorama of unabashed wealth and relentless poverty that now passes for "normalcy" in American cities. (Hopper, 2003, p. 193)

> Decades and decades have passed without the resolve to end such an epidemic. . . . [H]omelessness doesn't end. Year after year, shelters provide refuge, churches and temples provide meals, downtown missions offer care, social service agencies provide employment training and transitional housing. . . . Every Thanksgiving season, plastered on the pages of the local newspaper, you see a picture of a tattered homeless child or a hungry toothless homeless man smiling in front of a hot, piping meal. (Roberts, 2004, p. 17)

How is it that interest in social problems such as homelessness can rise and fall so rapidly, and often with no relation to the extent of the problem? Why did the mass media, politicians, advocates, and others react to the issue of homelessness in the 1980s, but relatively ignore it by the 1990s and 2000s? Why was homelessness expected to be a time-limited problem by both advocates and critics?

The Social Construction of Problems

Although many intelligent people assume that social problems receive attention when they first arise or when their scope reaches a certain level, this view has been widely criticized in the social sciences. In sociology

and related disciplines, social constructionist thinkers have compellingly argued that issues are constructed by certain forces—political leaders, the media, social movements, and others—and not necessarily at the time when these issues arise or when they become more problematic in any empirical way. This perspective begins with the idea that social problems do not exist "out there" in the world; they have to be defined, made known to much of the public, and accepted by experts and others in order to be legitimated (Blumer, 1971).

To take one example, Joel Best's (1989) seminal work on the "missing children" crisis of the 1980s conclusively illustrates that there was no increase in missing children in this period; nor is there any support for the idea that abduction by strangers was a serious issue at this time. Explaining how the issue of missing children became a national issue—with pictures of kids even appearing on milk cartons—is quite different from looking at the raw numbers of missing children. It was breathless mass media coverage, and increased police and criminal justice budgets devoted to this issue, that made us think more about missing children. To take another example, Craig Reinarman and Harry Levine (1997), among others, have illustrated how the problem of illegal drugs was far more widespread in the 1970s, well before the declaration of the "war on drugs" by the Reagan administration, than it was in the 1980s and 1990s. It was politics that dictated attention to illegal drugs, not anything "out there" in the empirical world.

Political scientists have also weighed in on the rise and fall of social problems. Going back to the work of Anthony Downs (1972), they have noted that Americans have an "issue attention cycle" that corresponds with political factors, not any objective reality. Barbara Nelson's important book *Making an Issue of Child Abuse* (1984) illustrates how forces in the 1960s helped make child abuse a public issue, although such behavior has long existed in the family and was already, by the 1980s as Nelson wrote, becoming less compelling to media and lawmakers, and hence to the public.

One can further note the many problems and issues that are always "out there" in the world, but about which we are silent. Poverty, for example, has long existed in the United States, yet it goes through cycles of discovery and rediscovery by experts and the mass media (see Ehrenreich, 1989). Environmental hazards have long been present, but were often not remarked upon prior to the rise of the modern environmental movement beginning in the late 1960s. It is not the problem that makes an issue, but its compelling discovery.

Interestingly, most of the social problems taken up by sociologists and political scientists can be considered as postmodern or cultural issues, but not economic problems. For example, social problems that have arisen since the 1960s and 1970s, including street crime, rape, domestic violence, drugs, missing children, hate crimes, and sexual abuse, have been subjects of articles and books describing their "social construction." Rarely, however, has a critique of economic issues—unemployment, poverty, wealth, the growing gap in incomes—been the subject of social constructionist critique. One reason may be that even social constructionists assume more of a "social fact" orientation (in other words, they somehow do not believe their own perspective that problems require discovery and claims and contestation) to economic conditions than to cultural ones. For example, despite disputes about the unemployment rate, there may be more widespread trust in the veracity of these statistics, at least relatively, than in what has been labeled "claims-making" by movements and media around certain cultural issues. Indeed, while we can criticize the way the unemployed are counted, the figures prove relative validity: for example, if the unemployment rate increases from 5 to 6 percent, we can all agree that things are getting worse. Another factor is that with "new" social problems, such as sexual abuse, the amount of previous abuse or its existence as a social problem is more speculative before its definition and naming, so perhaps these problems are more interesting to probe than better-known issues such as poverty and unemployment. A third possibility is that sociologists and other social scientists may assume, like advocates and other issue-oriented academics, that economic problems are *always* important. Therefore, that poverty or wealth has an attention cycle may be difficult to admit. In Chapter 2, I discuss the utility of theory to the social problem of homelessness generally. I also argue for the compatibility of social conflict theories and a social constructionist perspective. I do not, by any stretch of the imagination, argue that homelessness and extreme poverty are not facts for many in the United States, or that homelessness did not increase beginning in the late 1970s. However, I do suggest that, absent the strong influence of politicians and politics, mass media, activists, and movements in constructing the issue of homelessness, it may well have been ignored or been back-page news. There are those, ranging from family members to social workers to activists, who will always be concerned about homeless people. But in order to understand the career of homelessness as an issue, one needs to understand how the issue was presented to the public and why audiences respond (and sometimes do not respond) to issues.

Organization of the Book

After a discussion of theory and the proposed use of a stage theory of the development of social problems in Chapter 2, I introduce a historical approach in Chapter 3, as this is sometimes insufficiently developed in social constructionist interpretations. Again, perhaps the tendency of many theorists to discuss recently documented or defined social problems has been a cause of this insufficiency. With homelessness, there is a long history of such insufficiency, and generally it is fair to say that the treatment of the homeless and very poor has never been good in the United States. It is true that at some points in US history there were subcultures that saw the "hobo" and "tramp" as potential revolutionaries and romanticized them. But even when this was so, most famously in the organizing days of the Wobblies (the Industrial Workers of the World, who organized unskilled workers in the first two decades of the twentieth century), the vast majority of people did not subscribe to this view; nor did those who had power over the poor (police, railroad officials, and town, city, and county officials) treat them with respect. US history in many senses predicts that despite the very different construction of homelessness in the early 1980s (advocates christened them the "new homeless" in a clear attempt to distinguish them from the old "tramp"), the results would be similar to those of past epochs.

The remaining chapters move chronologically through the past three decades in the definition of and contestation over homelessness. In the very late 1970s, people became, for the first time in a generation, very visibly homeless, and this was a shocking sight. It also was a blow to the concept of self in the United States, which was then steeped in the idea of US prosperity. Almost immediately, however, homelessness became identified in a symbolic way. For activists, advocates, and those on the left and liberal wing of the Democratic Party, homelessness was a key issue of the 1980s, illustrating primarily the greed and heartless policies of the Ronald Reagan administration. Interestingly, this rhetoric was employed even by those groups, such as the Community for Creative Non-Violence (CCNV) in Washington, D.C., and the Coalition for the Homeless in New York City, that were active in advocating for the homeless under the Jimmy Carter administration, and hence were aware that the issue preceded Reagan taking office. It is perhaps telling that advocates often expected homelessness to end with Reagan and his policies. But, in retrospect, what the United States was witnessing was far broader: a major long-term downturn in the US economy and, in many areas of con-

sumption, particularly housing, a long-term decline in people's ability to sustain life's basic necessities.

Whereas the most stubborn denial of homeless people's suffering and the size of the problem came from the Reagan administration and its conservative allies, this is not to say that there was a direct correlation between political position and views about homelessness. Within academia and the professions, for example, many argued that issues like unemployment, deindustrialization, lack of affordable housing, and social service cutbacks were responsible for the rise in homelessness; others, however, including at least some liberals, stressed deinstitutionalization of mental hospitals and alcohol and drug issues as causing the rise in homelessness (for one example of an academic attack on the common wisdom about homelessness, see Baum and Burnes, 1993). Interesting changes would occur with time, as early advocates declared large numbers of homeless people to be mentally ill, a perspective they moved away from, in part, because this explanation was more of a characteristic stand of conservatives and some government officials. Also standing in the middle, where most Americans were as well, was the charity establishment, which recognized a new issue and source of funding and volunteering. Despite some local differences, a fair degree of symmetry occurred in such charitable appeals and programs, with temporary shelter and other palliative, nonthreatening services being offered. People jumped into the voluntary task with enthusiasm, optimistic about serving the most needy.

The liberal social construction of homelessness had its downside even in the halcyon days of the issue in the 1980s. Advocates and opponents alike tended to equate beliefs about the causes of homelessness with solutions, and with convincing the public and social service providers of one belief or another. However, the very definition of homelessness as a new emergency in some ways naturally supported the charitable approach to homelessness, which stressed homeless shelters and soup kitchens (see, for example, Lipsky and Smith, 1989; Hoch and Slayton, 1989). Moderates and even conservatives ultimately found the mild solutions to homelessness hard to be against (who can be against a soup kitchen?), and, as with other issues, it is not surprising that Reagan's successor, George H. W. Bush, who had called for "a kinder, gentler" nation, did not bother to fight the claims made about homelessness. The gap between critique and actual political changes or solutions to homelessness was huge, yet it seemed for a while that no one but a few radicals noticed this. In other words, shelters and soup kitchens and case managers would not end homelessness, yet few admitted or were willing to say this.

Equally paradoxical was the gap between liberal and charitable elements of the loose coalition to do something about homelessness, and their charges, the homeless themselves. Initially the clientele themselves seemed left out of the discussion. As time went on, however, more grassroots efforts occurred, with tent cities or encampments separate from official shelters being set up. In some cities, pitched battles would rage, most notably in New York City around Tompkins Square Park in the late 1980s and into the 1990s. Homeless activism, although supported to an extent by advocates, often contradicted the right of others to speak for them, and complicated the solution to homelessness as being one of shelters and social services. Many efforts by homeless and poor people themselves (sometimes joined by other radical elements in local communities) rejected these palliatives as forms of repression and social control, and demanded housing, jobs, and income.

It may well be that the intractability of homelessness to solution would have caused a decline in public attention to this issue in any case. By the late 1980s, the term "compassion fatigue" was being widely used to describe the middle-class and charitable weariness about the issue (Uzelec, 1990). The achievement of one legislative victory, the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, which for the first time provided federal monies to localities to benefit the homeless, and the expanding rift between a more radical solution to homelessness and charitable efforts, both probably in turn eased pressure on the issue, while also complicating it by splitting the ranks of people concerned about the homeless. Also important to this analysis is the election of Bill Clinton in 1992, and the end of Reagonomics as a target of advocacy groups. This election led to a decline in any mobilization for the homeless. As with many other issues of the 1980s, from AIDS to nuclear disarmament, the election of a Democrat caused a drop in activism. Some leaders of major advocacy and charitable groups, hoping for intervention from above as well as jobs themselves in the administration, certainly consciously moderated their demands and goals. But for most activists, service providers, and community leaders, it was not so much a conscious change, but a disorientation, that would prevail. While the Clinton administration, unlike the Reagan administration, was ready to frankly acknowledge this problem (as George W. Bush would do as well), neither administration took any major action to diminish homelessness. In fact, both arguably took policy actions that increased homelessness (for example, under Clinton, the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1993 and of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in

1996). The fact that these administrations would have little positive impact on homelessness and other problems of the poor was profoundly disorienting, because the issue had been defined in such a politically partisan way since 1981. It is true that, for now, more service providers and advocates (though they are small in number compared to the public) do advocate a "housing first" approach to homelessness, in which after nearly thirty years, palliative aids such as homeless shelters and social services are seen as less of a solution than is housing. Providers themselves have found it much easier to help people "get their life together" once those people have a roof over their head. Generally, though, for most Americans, homelessness entered the realm of a retinue of "back burner" problems, from child abuse to AIDS to illicit drugs, that are acknowledged but not considered very critical or immediate issues.

In concluding the book, Chapter 8 briefly explores how to assess the social construction of homelessness in the 1980s. It is difficult to know whether different outcomes could have occurred if the issue had been presented differently. In some ways, given the absence of broader social movements in the last decades of the twentieth century that would unite larger groups of people behind an economic justice campaign, it was perhaps inevitable that, like child abuse or other recent issues, homelessness would become primarily an issue of social service. Chapter 8 also briefly explores what this study can contribute to social constructionist perspectives, which so rarely tackle economic issues.

Homelessness, Poverty, and Definitional Issues

Homelessness presents problems of definition, first because it is a moving subset of poverty that is constantly changing despite stereotypes (people move onto and off the streets daily), and second because, both today and in other historical periods, people do not always mean the same thing by the term "homelessness." In some cultures and even in Western culture before the rise of capitalism and Protestantism, living on the street and begging was not stigmatized, and students, minstrels, and religious pilgrims shared the road with the poor. But even when the poor became highly stigmatized, it was not necessarily possible for the observer to always differentiate who was "sleeping rough," as the British say, from those who were merely on the move to a different abode or who looked "down and out." In the United States, there has been so much migration in our history that huge minorities could be considered technically home-

less at any given time (see Jasper, 2000). Social welfare and police officials were concerned only about those people who asked for aid. These officials enforced the Laws of Settlement, first passed in England, which required one to be the resident of a town or city for a certain period of time to be eligible for aid (usually also based on taxes paid; for women, settlement was based on the settlement status of the father or husband). Towns and cities set up extremely harsh penalties for the nonsettled, from warning them out of town to sending them to workhouses or houses of correction. But the ambiguity was strong, because if the person did not ask for aid or left the workhouse to go elsewhere, then, as Henry Miller notes, "the vagrant was a vagrant only so long as he or she stayed in town; if vagrant people took off for Kentucky or Ohio, they became something else: pioneers, perhaps settlers" (1991, p. xviii). During the era between the Civil War and the Great Depression, things became even more complicated, as the tremendous surge in railroads and industrial growth required a highly mobile transient labor force. Despite the fact that millions of men (and to a lesser degree families) moved across the country for work, they were harshly stigmatized as "tramps" by the newspapers and magazines. Others differentiated "tramps," "hobos," and "bums," with the usual sense that tramps were transient workers, hobos were local settled wage workers, and bums were those who did not want to work. In practice, of course, these all became highly stigmatized terms, and many people, workers or not, homeless or not, ended up caught in the harsh vagrancy laws of the time and sent to jail. The needs of mobile capitalism clashed, as we shall see in Chapter 3, with the social control needs of the state and, perhaps in some cases, of local businesses, to have a settled citizenry, just as today's debates on immigration split employers and others.

Homelessness was even more ambiguous in the Great Depression. Were those who lived in "Hoovervilles," the large shantytowns set up usually on the edges of US cities, always homeless? Not necessarily. Millions traveled the rails, and some had no home, but others were young men who left their parents' homes or even their own homes with their wives and children to find a job. Some authors refer to the famous Bonus Marchers of 1932 (see Kusmer, 2002, pp. 202–203) as being homeless, but again many of the veterans who lived in the mass camps surrounding Congress had homes elsewhere. So many people were poor and unsettled in the Great Depression that the line between poverty and homelessness broke down. Only the short-lived Federal Transient Bureau (as well as all the local public welfare officials) checked on the actual settlement of applicants.

Although there is strong evidence that homelessness arose anew beginning only in the late 1970s, it is also true that naming a problem changes it, and that the added attention to the new homelessness may have led to an understatement of the older problem. There were many young people living on the street in the 1960s and 1970s, but they were not usually considered a social problem. Christopher Jencks makes a good point when he contrasts the 1970s with the 1980s: "in the late 1980s most Americans assumed that everyone on the streets who looked unkempt or confused was homeless. In the late 1970s, we assumed such people had a home unless we saw clear evidence to the contrary, such as a grocery cart full of personal belongings" (1994, pp. 14–15). Usually in the 1970s, the "unkempt" poor went back to a lodging house or single-room occupancy in the central city. By the 1980s, many lacked a room at all. But this is only generally true, not always.

In any case, since the reappearance of homelessness, a rousing debate about the numbers of homeless people has occurred, with methodology, interpretation, and definition all contested. Generally, government has favored a restrictive definition that accepts as homeless only those who are literally homeless—meaning those who have absolutely no place to sleep—and often relies on shelter counts as a major part of its censuses. Advocates have consistently called for a broader definition that would include people living out of vehicles and in abandoned housing, people "doubled up" on floors and elsewhere in others' apartments, and even people who lack a regular home because they are in prison or other institutional quarters. When the US government sought to undertake a census of homeless people in 1980, 1990, and 2000, each time considerable opposition emerged among advocates, because clearly many homeless people do not readily make themselves available to government officials, and advocates believed that low counts would only hurt their cause (see Rossi, 1989; Wagner, 1993; Hopper, 2003). It is not the intent of this book to minimize the importance of numbers, which can vary from several hundred thousand a night on the street to several million, but rather to suggest that the debate is unsolvable, because it is not primarily methodological but rather political. Government and social service sources seek to define a clientele for shelters and case management, and hence are defining homelessness as an immediate, emergency service issue. Advocates are correct that the problem of homelessness is far more widespread, and if one includes those at risk of homelessness at some time in the year, we have huge numbers. But these numbers are supportive of political arguments for housing, income, jobs, and other broader aid.

We are to a certain extent at the mercy of historians and mass media when exploring the story of homelessness. Many homeless people do not look homeless, for the very reason of seeking work, going to school, and blending in with society. Some people may look homeless, but only be poor. The English term *roofless* would also help us differentiate those without any place to stay from those the advocates call homeless but who do have a roof—a motel, a friend or relative's couch, or a jail cell. We must keep in mind throughout the account of homelessness the fact that, for the most part, those who go through the experience are not usually writers, and that we do not have precise empirical details on homelessness.

Sources of Data and Methods of Inquiry

Following the theoretical and historical discussions in Chapters 2 and 3, I analyze the developments in homelessness over the past three decades with the aid of several sources of data. The Coalition for the Homeless, the largest advocacy group for the homeless in the United States, kindly allowed access to all of its newsletters, which began in early 1983. In addition, four major newspapers—the *New York Times,* the *Chicago Tribune,* the *Los Angeles Times,* and the *Boston Globe*—have been analyzed between 1979 and 2008, with a complete sampling every other year of the period (but varying the skipped years among the papers in order not to miss event coverage). Although there is little precision when studying newspapers, the few studies done on reports of homelessness in newspapers have perhaps overemphasized developments in New York City and Washington, D.C. (see Bogard, 2003). While developments in New York City in particular are reported elsewhere, the *New York Times* still lays claim to being the "paper of record," so it was included in the analysis. But in order to gain a more regionally and politically balanced look at the issue of homelessness, Los Angeles and Chicago as well as Boston were included (politically, the *Chicago Tribune* is the most center-right and the *Boston Globe* is the most liberal). One idea in particular, that the advocacy of Mitch Snyder's D.C.-based CCNV and Robert Hayes's New York City–based Coalition for the Homeless was critical in the social construction of homelessness, was not borne out by this research; the press made very few references to Mitch Snyder or Robert Hayes or their groups in the first few years of the homeless crisis.

In most ways, the articles in the papers, including news stories and editorials, were far more similar than different. Only in the early years of

the "new" homeless problem was there a contrast: the *New York Times* gave rather consistent attention to the idea that homelessness was caused by deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, in part, no doubt, because of Mayor Edward Koch's campaign in the 1980s to secure state funding for the homeless by blaming the state of New York's policies. The *Los Angeles Times* and *Chicago Tribune* emphasized the deep recession of the period as causing homelessness, while the *Boston Globe* covered a variety of causal issues. Still, overall, not only is there evidence that the media handled homelessness similarly, but also there is no evidence that coverage of different issues as causal actually led to any different social policies. Generally, US cities followed the discovery of homelessness by building shelters, opening soup kitchens, and providing social services, but none came close to reducing the number of homeless people in their cities. Additionally, I analyzed the Vanderbilt Television News Archive to gather information on broadcast media coverage (networks only) of the homeless in abstract form. I also analyzed the approximately three dozen major books on homelessness in this period as well as major academic articles on the topic.

All materials about homelessness in the four newspapers, the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, the National Coalition for the Homeless newspaper, and other sources were coded so that counts could be made of positive and negative stories about the homeless, of discovery and naming of the issue, of quests for charity and shelter provision, and later of compassion fatigue and anger about the issue, for example. This qualitative examination was done in conjunction with the quantitative examination of the decline in homeless stories. Throughout the years of the study (1979–2009), there were stories of three types in each period—"enthusiastic excitement," "sober realization," and institutionalization—however, the balance among these types of story would differ considerably. Even advocates limited their focus as time went on, moving from rousing calls to action to reports on annual budgets, job postings, and the ins and outs of legislative work.

Perhaps most interesting, in talking with advocates and experts on the homeless issue, we found no dissension that the issue of homelessness, once a subject of front-page news, had fallen from public attention. In fact, many people expressed retrospective surprise that the issue of homelessness was still with us in the twenty-first century. The only question was whether the current lack of interest in homelessness was inevitable given the short attention span of Americans, or whether the decline represented something more fundamental about the way the issue

had been framed. Of course, for this type of social science hypothesis, it is impossible to prove. Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that, in many ways, and regardless of the short attention span of the US population, the very manner in which advocates, experts, and the mass media constructed the issue laid the seeds of its decline over time. While the focus was on public sympathy, charity, and palliative aid such as shelters, these were never sufficient to solve homelessness or even to have a major ameliorative effect. Moreover, while the tendency early on to blame the Reagan administration and construct a "new" homeless population is understandable, such constructions are not sustainable in the long term. This view is not meant as a critique of the merits of homeless advocacy per se, but as a reflection of the limits of social reform in the United States, particularly with regard to deeply entrenched social and economic issues.

Notes

1. With the newspapers, given the large number of citations, it was not possible to separate stories about the "homeless" that were not exactly about the new period of homelessness in the United States; for example, some stories about people made homeless due to floods, wars, disasters, and other causes in foreign nations could not be excluded, nor could even stories about "homeless pets." Instead, we decided to search for the word "homelessness," although this reduced the count, it ensured that the articles were consistently related to the desired topic. With the Vanderbilt Television News Archive, because the number of stories was far more limited, stories that contained the word "homeless" in them but that were not about homeless people in the United States were more easily excluded.

2. Of course, any definition of homelessness is arbitrary. Although we do not usually include flood victims who are homeless as part of the broader problem of homelessness, many advocates at the time of Hurricane Katrina used the tragedy, as exemplified in the footage of New Orleans, to remind Americans of the large numbers of poor and homeless people in the nation.